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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine parents' perceptions of a kindergarten program in the face of change toward a holistic language/literacy curriculum. The participants were the parents of 25 children enrolled in an all day kindergarten class of a university-based child development center. Nine of the parents (all mothers) volunteered to be interviewed individually about parental perceptions of their child's reading and writing development. One theme which was strongly supported was how seriously this group of parents viewed their role in helping their child learn to read and write. One reason for the high degree of acceptance of this approach is that it validates and extends the type of literacy activity that had been occurring in the home. The parents who expressed satisfaction with the whole language kindergarten seemed to feel that the emphasis on informal social interactions and development of positive feelings in children about themselves as readers led their children to reading. Some parents voiced strong concern about helping children with writing through invented spelling and expressed concern about what would happen to their children in first grade. Findings underscore the importance of parents and teachers working together. (The interview protocol is attached.) (MG)

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PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN'S READING AND WRITING DEVELOPMENT IN A WHOLE LANGUAGE KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM

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PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDREN'S READING AND WRITING DEVELOPMENT IN A WHOLE LANGUAGE KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM

Many educators would agree that whole language is an idea whose time has come. Dissatisfied with the highly structured, analytic, and abstract approaches to literacy education found in the traditional basal approach, many teachers have opted for a less structured and holistic whole language orientation. Goodman and Goodman (1981) have described a whole language approach as one that focuses on the construction of meaning by the reader during reading, the processes of prediction, selection, confirmation, and self correction, and the functional uses of reading and writing. The role of the teacher consists of creating stimulating learning environments, providing relevant materials, and being a source of encouragement and support for young readers and writers.

The role of parents, too, is being increasingly recognized as crucial to successful school experiences. In her review of research on parental involvement in schools and learning, Henderson (1988) reports that the role parents play in facilitating student improvement is undeniably important. From the home environment to school involvement, when parents are actively involved in positive ways improvement in student achievement follows.

One area that proponents of whole language curricula do not address fully is the role of parents. While acknowledging that involvement of parents is critical whole

language advocates have not explored adequately the full range of issues that are related to parents. An area that is of particular concern is parental perceptions and support of curriculum changes toward a whole language orientation. Parents are not always aware of innovations in curriculum and may resist efforts to change an existing curriculum that they have viewed as wholly satisfactory.

The purpose of the present study was to determine parents' perceptions of a kindergarten program in the face of change toward a holistic language/literacy curriculum. Do the beliefs parents have about literacy learning influence their acceptance of a curricular change? Moreover, we felt that it was critical to document the specific concerns of parents beyond general acceptance or rejection of the curriculum. Sensitivity to even minor concerns of parents would seem important to help teachers gain the full trust and cooperation of parents and move toward greater levels of parental empowerment. Three research questions framed this study:

1. What beliefs did the parents appear to hold about the process kindergarten children's development of reading and writing?
2. Did the parents believe that the whole language approach taken by the teacher matched their own expectations of a kindergarten reading and writing program? What reasons would the parents give for

stating the program met or failed to meet their expectations?

3. What concerns did the parents express about their child's reading and writing development?

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were the parents of children enrolled in an all day kindergarten class of a university-based child development center. The center serves approximately one hundred seventy five children from infancy through the kindergarten year. Children who attend the tuition charging center are primarily from middle to upper middle SES families. The curriculum of the center is based on the principles of "developmentally appropriate practice" for young children as outlined by the National Association of Educators of Young Children (Bredekamp, 1987). Classes are organized to allow children maximum choice of activities and instruction is planned around theme units.

In previous years the kindergarten maintained a "letter of the week" alphabet program, the same program used in nearby public school kindergartens. During the summer of 1988, the newly hired kindergarten teacher stated she did not wish to use this letter program and would rather begin a whole language approach. This change in curriculum was enthusiastically accepted by the center

director. Parents were informed of this curricular change through a fall newsletter. The program was formally explained to the parents at the annual Parent Orientation Meeting held in October. Many parents had the opportunity to speak informally with the kindergarten teacher during conferences after school. The teacher reported talking about literacy learning during these individual meetings frequently and throughout the year.

Data Collection & Analysis

In May a letter was sent to all parents of the twenty-five children attending the kindergarten program stating that we wished to learn about parental perceptions of their child's reading and writing development during the kindergarten year. Nine parents, all mothers, volunteered to be individually interviewed by one of the three researchers during May or June. Open-ended interview questions were designed to elicit responses in the parents' own words (Spradley, 1979). (Appendix A contains the interview protocol). The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis.

Each interview was analyzed through categorical analysis (Spradley, 1979) in which domains were constructed and organized into taxonomies. An individual case was constructed for each parent based on the categorical analysis. Each of the nine cases were then searched for themes relevant to the research questions.

FINDINGS

Beliefs About How Children Learn to Read and Write

In talking about how children develop knowledge of literacy each of the parents began by describing early home factors they believed were important for literacy development. All nine mothers stated it was important to have books available in the home and all added that they believed it was important to read regularly to their young children. For example, Mrs. H said that both her children learned to read through "exposure and being read to." All parents reported that they read nightly with their children at home.

Five parents mentioned that not only did they read to their children, but that they also believed it was important to encourage their children to "try" reading during these regular reading sessions. Mrs. A stated, "I encourage these first attempts." And Mrs. D, "It's important to let them try." Mrs. N described a pattern of "sharing" the reading of a book with her child, "I would read it first, and then she would read. Then she'd read it over and over again." Mrs. D described a similar pattern, "Usually, he'll want to read a book and then he'll want me to read a book." Mrs. M added that these early experiences should be with interesting books, indicating that she hated to learn to read as a child because of the "stupid books" she was forced to read.

Four parents stated they believed an important

component of children's learning to read involved parents modeling reading behavior. Mrs. A said, "My husband and I model reading a lot so that she would grow to think reading is natural thing to do." Mrs. D stated, "Both my husband and myself read a lot. We've got books all over the place. We value that and the kids see it."

The role of phonics in early reading was mentioned by five of the parents interviewed, although their opinions varied. Mrs. S believed most strongly in the importance of a "systematic phonics program" as a way of preventing failure in reading. She stated her daughter knew the letters and sounds because she had taught her prior to kindergarten. Mrs. H said an important part of her daughter's learning to read developed as she watched Sesame Street and learned the sounds of letters. Mrs. D stated it was important to be supportive of children's initial attempts to sound out words. Mrs. B believed that children learned differently, "Some learn by sight and some by a systematic phonics approach." Mrs. M stated she thought phonics had no place in initial reading experiences, "I'm not big on phonics, even if the school had used it, I would not use it at home."

Two parents discussed the importance of children developing knowledge of literacy through reading environmental print as a beginning of reading. For example, Mrs. A, "We'd be driving and she'd see 'ACME' in

the car and know it was the grocery store. She'd read 'Coke' on cans and when she was three or four she would read signs on TV."

Several parents discussed the importance of functional use of writing in the home as being helpful. Five parents stated their children were involved in writing notes and letters to family members. Often the children printed these notes themselves with the parents providing the correct spelling. Mrs. C said that she often wrote her daughter notes and placed them in her lunch box. She believed that attempting to read these notes was important in motivating her child to read.

Mrs. K indicated her belief in how children learned to read and write had changed as a result of her son's kindergarten experience. She commented on how she was now approaching her second child's attempt at reading, "I am less compulsive about how children spell and I am less apt to correct a word read." Mrs. A stated she felt more confident in that what she intuitively was doing at home was helpful to her daughters reading development. "I thought I was doing it (valuing pretend reading) to make myself feel better. I knew there were a couple of girls who were really reading and so I thought I should work with her in a more systematic manner. I thought maybe I need to sit down with her and finger each word on a piece of paper. It (the year's experience) reassured me that what I was doing was okay."

Did the Whole Language Program Match Parent Expectations?

Of the nine parents, seven believed there was a close match between their expectations of a kindergarten literacy program and the kind of experience their child encountered daily in the kindergarten program. One parent, Mrs. S a junior high remedial reading instructor, was very much opposed to the program stating that children need systematic phonics to get a good start in reading. Another parent, Mrs. K, was concerned during the first semester that her son would not be properly prepared for first grade. During the course of the school year, she changed her thoughts, aligning her beliefs with the kindergarten procedure.

In describing her change in feelings, Mrs. K emphasized the importance she at first attributed to phonics instruction. Her three older children had all had a phonics based kindergarten program, and this appeared to be what Mrs. K expected to happen for her current kindergartner. She was concerned about the kind of work her son was doing in school. She was worried because she did not receive "feedback about her son's performance" in a familiar manner (i.e. workbook pages). She was afraid she would not be able to document the skills he should be learning. The lack of a systematic phonics program did not match with her expectations of a kindergarten program which "prepared" children to be successful at first grade

work. Even at the year's end, some doubt remained, "I am uncertain. The kindergarten program in our district used 'Letter People' and emphasized sounding out and my son is not good at sounding out."

However, by the end of the year Mrs. K appeared to balance her worry about her son's lack of ability to "sound out" words with the fact that he appeared much more excited about books and reading than her other children. Specifically, she mentioned his attitude toward reading and feelings about himself, "He wasn't afraid to read books." Mrs. K spoke very positively of the risk-free environment. The classroom had "lots of praise, no criticism." She stated she liked the way the teacher and other children supported each other.

As she observed her son over the year, Mrs. K stated she came to believe the program did match her "changing expectations." Talking about these changes in her beliefs she stated, "I don't push phonics anymore. If I were reading a book I'll ask what do you think this word is and he'll guess a word, and if he says house and the word is home, I don't correct him." With her older children, Mrs. K related, she would say, "Sit down and read this book to me." With her current kindergarten child Mrs. K said she would say, "Tell me the story and he'll go for the pictures." Mrs. K appeared to believe that even though her son might not have quite the same phonic knowledge as other children he wouldn't be disadvantaged. "I'm concerned that

some of the neighborhood kids can write words and are familiar with some sight words that he is not tuned into yet. I think he'll do okay if he gets the right teacher and the right environment."

Mrs. S, on the other hand, remained firm in her belief that the new program was poor because it did not teach phonics in a systematic fashion and, because of this, did not prepare children appropriately for first grade. Mrs. S attributed the failure of her junior high remedial students to a lack of a good foundation in phonics. Furthermore, Mrs. S was concerned about the problem of poor self esteem which she often observed concurrently with lack of good reading progress. "Anything you can do to prevent a child from feeling negative about reading, you have to do." According to Mrs. S, a systematic phonic program in which children progress through clearly defined skills is the best way to prevent failure in reading.

Mrs. S's two older children had learned to read through a "letter of the week" program and from her perspective not only learned letters well, but enjoyed it. "The children eat food associated with the letter and do a lot of positive things like singing and dancing." In contrast, Mrs. S stated her daughter's whole language experiences were not enjoyable. She described her child as being extremely frustrated with invented spelling. Mrs. S thought it was unfair to ask children to spell before they

had learned their letters. Mrs. S. believed this experience was endangering her daughter's self esteem. She and her husband discussed withdrawing their child from the program, but decided to have her remain because movement to a new classroom might be distressing. To counteract the "poor instruction", Mrs. S described a systematic reading and writing program she implemented with her daughter for 30 to 45 minutes each evening.

The remaining seven parents believed the program matched well with their expectations of an appropriate approach to beginning reading. All of these parents stated that a major reason for the match was because of the support and encouragement their children received. Three parents explicitly noted the lack of stress "low risk," "low key", "informal," "the children are encouraged to try - just keep trying." Four parents spoke specifically about the encouragement their children received. Mrs. D summarized the importance attributed to the affective climate, "The main thing is my son is with adults who care about him."

The role of the teacher seemed to be especially important to the parents in describing why the program was well-matched with their expectations. Labeling objects around the room was, in particular, one teacher practice that many parents viewed as positive. Mrs. M stated she, too, began to label objects throughout her home. The mothers described the teacher's enthusiasm for books which

they saw transmitted to their children. They commented on being impressed with the amount and quality of children's literature as well as the interest their children were developing in authors and illustrators. All of the parents positively described the manner in which the teacher interacted with children and modeled acceptance of individual differences. Mrs. D stated, "There was a real valuing and encouragement of any effort." And from Mrs. C, "I got the impression that she (the teacher) waits for the children to be ready but provides multitudes of opportunities for them to whet their appetites."

Concerns with the Whole Language Curriculum

Two of the parents had no concerns with the kind of literacy program offered to their children during the year. Mrs. C, in fact, described the program as a natural extension of her own interactions with her daughter, stressing that informality of instruction, functional use of print, and the involvement of the teacher were all important components she believed in. Mrs. C stated she believed an important reason for her daughter's good progress was the compatibility between home and school. Mrs. D also stated she had no concerns, indicating that her son was "adaptable" and could easily adjust to a variety of situations.

Five of the parents stated the process of invented spelling was of some concern to them. Mrs. S expressed the

greatest reservations with this approach toward writing, indicating that her daughter did not have the background. (Interestingly, Mrs. S. stated her daughter did know all of her letters and sounds because she had taught them to her prior to kindergarten.) Mrs. S repeatedly stated that when children are required to do something in which they have not had adequate training, they will not be able to do the task, but will also feel frustrated and unsure of themselves. Mrs. S's concern reflected her feeling that invented spelling was not the way to develop knowledge of writing in young children.

While the other four parents also described feelings of frustration their children experienced, they were more concerned with how to help their child adjust to using invented spelling. These children apparently had done much early writing at home and the parents had helped through supplying the correct spelling of words. Mrs. A stated her daughter wrote frequently prior to kindergarten. Much of this early writing included letter writing to relatives and friends and responding to children's magazines. "She would dictate, we would spell and she would write the words." However, Mrs. A stated that as invented spelling was encouraged in the school her daughter, who had been a "writing maniac" became frustrated. Mrs. A reported her daughter would say, "I don't like writing because the teacher won't help me. She won't tell me how to spell the words." Mrs. A described her own frustration during this

period, "I thought now we have really set her up. We were telling her how to spell words. Now she is stuck. She often knows what she is doing is incorrect. She knows it doesn't look right." Mrs. A noted that during this time she was able to talk over her problem with the teacher and as the teacher worked with her child, her daughter became less frustrated with the process.

Mrs. N described her daughter's frustration in not being able to reread her invented spellings. "It was very hard in the beginning of the year because she would bring things home and say, 'Mommy you read it' and I would have absolutely no idea of what it was meant to say. She would be very upset and we would have to sit down with her and say, you can read it. That was a terribly difficult few months."

Not only was the child's frustration problematic for these four parents, several also questioned the sequencing of instruction. They worried their children would not have sufficient knowledge to be successful at invented spelling. Mrs. A stated, "I didn't get information on whether phonics was taught first, as the basis for writing....I knew she didn't know her vowels." Mrs. B. also was worried about whether her daughter would be successful at writing without training in conventional spelling.

The second set of concerns reflected the parents' worries about first grade placement. Mrs. S believed that

without a strong phonics program, her daughter would not have the skills to be placed in a top reading group and would come to see herself as a poor reader. Despite her changing expectations, Mrs. K still continued to worry that her son would be at a handicap because his knowledge of phonics would be different than that of the kindergarten children. On the other hand, three parents stated their concerns revolved around the different classroom atmosphere their child might encounter with a skills-based first grade. Mrs. M worried about how her daughter would react to a structured classroom. Mrs. B hoped the new school would accept her child's individuality. Mrs. K believed her son would do fine if he got the "right teacher". Mrs. A and Mrs. C also expressed concern, believing their daughters might be bored with a limited approach toward reading and writing. Both were optimistic, however. Mrs. A indicated that her daughter was "adaptable" and Mrs. C. stated her daughter was a "survivor".

IMPLICATIONS

This exploratory study opened a small window which allowed us to begin to understand the perceptions of a particular group of parents whose children were engaged in a developing whole language program. One theme which while not surprising, is strongly supported by the findings of this study, is how seriously this group of middle SES parents viewed their role in helping their child learn to read and write. All reported they believed literacy

development begins at home, and through their words they have illustrated how seriously they have undertaken this responsibility through regularly interacting with their children in reading and writing experiences.

It seems that one reason for high degree of acceptance of the whole language approach is that it validates and extends the type of literacy activity that had been occurring in the home. The informal caring and, low risk environment and the focus on the affective dimensions of reading are some important characteristics that were found both in the home and in the kindergarten curriculum. How other parents (such as Mrs. S) who hold a more structured and analytic orientation toward literacy instruction and engage in those activities at home, would respond to a whole language curriculum is a question worth pursuing.

For this group of parents acceptance of a whole language approach toward early reading activities was not difficult. Parents responded enthusiastically to their children's growing interest in reading books. Developing an enthusiasm and a love for stories was a goal shared by both parents and the teacher. Several parents also reported that during the course of the year, they were able to begin to share responsibility for reading with their children. Several mothers stated that during a nightly reading period, the child would read with their parent. The parents seemed more easily comfortable in helping their

children in these early reading attempts. Mrs. H stated that if her daughter doesn't know a word, "I tell her what it is." Even Mrs. K reported that she had "learned" to not expect her son to read each word correctly. She noticed it did not interfere with his understanding of the story and his enthusiasm for reading appeared greater than that of his brothers and sisters.

Interestingly, the parents who expressed satisfaction with the whole language kindergarten seemed to feel that the emphasis on informal social interactions and development of positive feelings in children about themselves as readers led their children to reading. The one mother dissatisfied with the program felt that the approach taken to reading instruction actually resulted in diminished self esteem. In both cases parents were concerned about their children's affect, although their perceived outcomes were considerably different. It appears that these parents are seriously concerned about their children's affective disposition toward reading and how they view themselves as beginning readers.

General acceptance not withstanding, some parents voiced strong concern about one component of the program, helping children with writing through invented spelling. Parents were concerned that their children did not have appropriate skills to be successful at this task. For some, encouraging invented spelling was an approach that was contrary to their previous pattern of supplying

children with correct spellings. How we can better help parents prepare their child for writing is an important area of further investigation.

Parents also expressed concern about what will happen to their children in first grade. While this was especially important in this private school setting, it demonstrates how aware parents are of how the effect of ability grouping can improve their child's development and feelings of self confidence.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of parents and teachers working together. Several parents who were highly supportive noted that when they had questions, they could go to the teacher who would listen to their concerns and at those times provide them with information. The overall feeling that the teacher was working for her child appeared to be a strong factor in the parent believing this kindergarten experience was a worthwhile experience for her child.

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Appendix A

Parent Interview

1. Talk about your child's reading and writing development during the kindergarten years.

2. How do you think children learn to read and write? Is this the same feeling you had before?

3. What kinds of literacy related activities do you do at home with your child?

4. Has the way your child is taught reading changed the way you do literacy related activities at home?

5. How would you describe the approach taken to the teaching of reading and writing by your child's teacher?

6. What kinds of concerns or questions do you have regarding your child learning to read and write.